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ABSTRACT

Information from a workshop on how to help preschool teachers discuss death with young children is presented. Limitations of young children's preoperational thought processes are noted, including children's confusion about the irreversibility of death and the loss of a sense of trust in their environment. Children have different ways of dealing with grief, such as denial, depression, or panic. Adults must help them move through the mourning process to reconciliation, as well as prepare them beforehand. Anecdotes and children's literature illustrate the process. Contains 26 references, including 16 books appropriate to read with children. (LB)

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Helping Young Children Deal With Death

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HELPING YOUNG CHILDREN DEAL WITH DEATH

In a recent survey of preschool teachers, 90% felt it was important to be able to discuss death with young children, but only 32% felt prepared to do so (Pratt, Hare, & Wright, 1985). This workshop is an attempt to do something about this! Children need the support of caring adults, both teachers and parents, when they come face to face with the death of a significant other. They need to be reassured that it is all right to be sad, to cry, and to talk about their loss.

Before looking at specific ways to help young children deal with death, we must keep in mind the limitations of their preoperational thought processes. Because they are concrete thinkers, it is very hard for them to understand abstract concepts such as life or death. Speece and Brent (1984) reviewed research literature dealing with children's understanding of death. In general, researchers found that the age at which at least fifty percent of the children understood the concepts of irreversibility, nonfunctionality, and universality was seven years, related to their achievement of the intellectual stage of concrete operations.

Most preschool children do not understand that once something living has died, that its body cannot be made alive again. They believe that doctors or hospitals can fix up dead people, so that they are all right again. Children may be able to verbally acknowledge that their granny has died, but at the same time they expect that someday she will come back. Children are further confused about the irreversibility of death because of religious explanations such as

"God took Granny up to live with Him in heaven." Since other people move away then come back to visit, granny will too.

The concept of nonfunctionality, that with death comes the cessation of all life-defining functions, is beyond young children's understanding too. Because of their egocentric thinking, it is difficult for them to perceive of a person who does not act or feel as they do. Death is often seen as a kind of lying down immobility. Sometimes adults, in their attempts to explain death to young children, describe it as like sleep. This reinforces children's idea that the dead person will reawake and be hungry, as they feel when they wake up.

Because the separation between reality and fantasy is fuzzy for young children, their magical thinking affects their understanding of death. In trying to make sense of their world, they see cause and effect operating in what adults see as random events. If a loved one dies, the child may believe that some wish or behavior of his/hers caused the death. This can lead to strong guilt feelings. But magical thinking can also bring hope. They may believe that if they wish hard enough, or are very good, the loved one who has died will return.

A strong developmental need of children in these early years is experiencing a sense of trust in their environment. Death of a person important to them shakes this sense of trust. Not only is this person no longer available to them, but the other adults in the child's life are often so upset and tied up in their own grief that they are less available to the child. Children's autonomy is also threatened by death: "I want Daddy to tuck me in, but he's not here."' I want to

play with my friend, but he's dead." Not many children have the maturity displayed by four-year-old Donna in this incident reported by her baby-sitter, a student teacher in our Early Childhood Center.

> Donna's great-grandfather had died and the next day her family was flying to Illinois for the funeral. We were in the kitchen making a snack. Donna was standing on a stool and said "Kit, guess what? Tomorrow I'm going to Illinois and have a celebration. We're going to have a cake and candies. Did you know my great-grandfather died?" Kit answered "Yes, your mother told me." Donna pointed one finger at me and said "He was a very old man." She looked at the light over the kitchen table and said "He was as old as a light bulb about to burn out." Kit said "Yes, like a light bulb he spread joy and happiness to everyone instead of light. But even when we turn off the light we remember what it looked like. When a person dies we remember what they were like too."

Kit provides a good example of an adult who is comfortable in discussing death with a young child. But that is not always true with all adults. Parents and teachers need to reassure young children that sadness and grief are natural expressions of love for the person who has died, not something to hide or be ashamed of.

> "Mourning is not just feeling sad. It is the specific psychological process by which human beings become able to give up some of the feelings they have invested in a person who no longer exists,and extend their love to the living. Mourning is hard, emotional work. It is pulling memories into focus, and allowing ourselves to be touched by the feelings they carry with them. It is struggling with guilt that we might have done better and anger that we are left alone. It is taking up the disrupted threads of our life and finding new patterns to weave of them. It is giving up a person who is no more."
> (Stein, <u>About Dying</u>, p. 10)

Coping with grief may affect young children in a variety of ways, and we need to remember that there is no "right" way to grieve. Wolfelt (1983) does an excellent job of describing dimensions of childhood grief. As with adults, there may be denial or disbelief at first. A six-year-old son of a friend killed in a traffic accident

went the day after the accident with my preschool class to visit a farm. When we got back, he excitedly said to his 8-year-old sister "I've got to tell Mom that I rode a horse." His sister said "Don't you remember? She's dead." "Well then, I'm going to tell Dad." Because a young child often seems to forget his grief and goes about business of play as usual, adults may see this lack of expressed feelings as indifference. But it's a normal coping mechanism at this age.

The expected reaction of sadness at a loved one's death may come some time after the loss has occurred. This is expressed not only through crying, but in a general depression. There may be a change of eating and sleeping patterns. Often there is regression into increased thumb-sucking, reversal of toilet training, overdependence on their caregivers. In a way, the child is showing that he or she wants to return to the sense of protection and security that was experienced earlier in life.

At times, the child's fears may be expressed in panic. Because the child has lost trust in the environment, he may be frightened that no one will take care of him. If a parent has died, there may be a strong fear that the other parent will also die. This fear may also find expression in anger: at the person who has died, at the doctor who couldn't "fix" the loved one, or even at friends who aren't hurting because of death. This anger turned inward may lead to deeper depression.

What can adults do to help children who have suffered a loss? Our goal should be to help the child move through the mourning process

to reconciliation. Wolfelt (1983) describes reconciliation as a recognition that although life will be different without the presence of the person who has died, it is possible to establish new and enriching relationships that give a sense of meaning and purpose to life. He reminds us the bereaved child's reconciliation after a death is a process, not an event. Reconciliation never occurs all at once and is often a slow and painful process.

One way adults can help children cope with the death of a significant other is by preparing them before this happens. Sadness and grief are caused by a variety of separations and loss, and learning to deal with smaller separations will help prepare the child for the experience of the death of a loved one. Children need to understand that death is a normal part of the life process. Teachers can take advantage of such teachable moments as the death of a pet to deal honestly with the children's concerns and questions.

Non-threatening discussions of death can also be encouraged by the reading of well-written children's books on this topic. See the list at the end of this article for a small sampling of these. Jim's Dog Muffin (Cohen, 1984) and When a Pet Dies (Rogers, 1988) encourage talking about the death of a pet and the feelings of frustration, sadness and loneliness that a child may feel. Fred Rogers reassures children in his book "No matter how sad or angry you feel when your pet dies, one thing you can be sure of is that you won't always feel that way...Happy times and sad times are part of everyone's life. When a pet dies, we can grow to know that the love we shared is still alive in us and always will be."

It is more difficult to talk about the death of a person, but excellent books have been written to explore this subject too. Children can identify with a character in the book and can more easily discover and examine their own concerns by seeing them in others. With a caring adult reading a book with them, hurts can be shared more easily and problems talked about and worked out.

When a death does occur that deeply affects a child, various kinds of support can be given. Be honest about what has happened, for a conspiracy of silence just magnifies loneliness and fears. Children need to be told about the death in an open and honest way. Use the word "dead" and explain that being dead means that there is no life, no eating, so sleeping, no movement, no pain. Talk about what is done with the body. Explain that a funeral is a time when relatives and friends get together to remember the person who died. Prepare them for the emotional responses they may see by explaining that sometimes when people are sad at a funeral they may cry and that's OK.

Parents and teachers need to provide warmth and understanding as they give honest answers to the child's questions. Often the same questions may come up again and again. Cook and Oltjenbruns (1989) remind us that young children who have experienced a death of a loved one will need to deal with their grief at each new developmental stage.

> "For example, a 4-year-old girl whose father died in a car accident may not totally resolve her grief in the months or years immediately following the death. As she grows older and her concept of death matures, she will gain deeper understanding of the permanence of death and what it means never again to interact with her father. As she becomes capable of thinking in the abstract, she may philosophically question the meaning of the death. As she becomes an

> adolescent and searches for her own identity, she grieves her loss anew and wonders how she herself would have been different had her father lived. When she grows into young adulthood status and gives birth to her first child, she mourns another aspect of her much earlier loss-the fact that her own child will never know her father, the baby's grandfather." (p. 156)

Teachers who are less involved in the process of mourning than are the child's parents, may be better able to offer needed emotional support to the child. The early childhood classroom can be a safe place where life goes on in a normal way, rebuilding the child's trust. The teacher, as a significant person in the child's life, can help by being open to his questions and his need to talk about his feelings. As children's questions about death are answered, increased understanding gives them increased sense of control. Open ended statements about the death and the grief being experienced allows the child to talk and lets him know that his feelings are normal. The child may also need to be reassured that he will be taken care of, and that other loved ones are not likely to die for a long, long time. Another way the teacher can help is by providing play opportunities to help the child express and clarify feelings about the death, and by trying to be on hand to help the child interpret them.

In closing, I'd like to share a statement from a funeral bulletin that seemed to summarize my feelings about death.

> "When a man is born, he begins to die. Death may come to some after may years of full and happy living. To others, it seems to come prematurely. Some may find in dying a blessed relief from months or years of agonizing suffering. Other lives are snuffed out in an instant. Whenever it comes or however it is accomplished, death is a process of life. It is inevitable, severe, simple. It is always a shock to those who survive. It is an imponderable mystery. Death is a problem not to those who die, but to those who live."

Best wishes to you as you seek to help young children deal with the mystery of death.

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Wolfelt, A. (1983). Helping children cope with grief. Muncie, Ind.: Accelerated Development.

Books to Read with Children:

Burningham, J. (1984). Granpa. New York: Crown.
A little girl and her grandfather share very special moments until he becomes ill and one day his chair is empty.

Cohen, M. (1984). Jim's Dog Muffin. New York: Greenwillow Books.
Jim's first grade classmates try to cheer him up when his dog gets run over and killed. Normal reactions to grief are shown.

Cohn, J. (1987). I had a friend named Peter. New York: William Morrow. Betsy's friend Peter was killed as he ran across the street. Her parents help her deal with his death, answering questions about dying, funerals, and the burial process. Gives suggestions for helping children cope.

Dabcovich, L. (1985). Mrs. Huggins and her hen Hannah. New York: Dutton. Mrs. Huggins and her hen do everything together until the hen gets sick and dies. A baby chick hatches to carry on the friendship between woman and pet.

DePaola, T. (1973). Nana upstairs and Nana downstairs. New York: Putnam. This tells of the relationship between Tommy and his grandmother and great-grandmother whom he visited Sunday afternoons, and his sorrow at their deaths.

Fassler, J. (1971). My grandpa died today. New York: Behavioral Publications. The story describes the relationship between David and his grandfather. When Grandpa sleeps away to a peaceful death in his rocking chair, David struggles to understand and accept his death.

Hammond, J. (1981). When my dad died: A child's view of death. Ann Arbor, Mi.: Cranbrook Publishing. This book is in the format of a coloring book, with a suggestion that the child could color the pictures and write his/her own story at the end. Good suggestions are found in the preface for adults. (Older preschoolers.)

Hickman, M. (1984). Last week my brother Anthony died. Nashville, Abington Press. Julie describes her feelings following the death of her four-week-old baby brother. Her parents and the family's minister talk with her, sharing in her grief.

Hogan, N. (1983). My grandmother died but I won't forget her. Nashville, Abington. A young boy whose grandmother has recently died remembers the funeral and finds comforting reminders of her around the house.

LeTord, Bijou (1987). My Grandma Leonie. New York: Bradbury Press. This book with delicate water-color drawings describes all the things a little girl did with her grandmother and how she felt when her grandmother died. "If I missed her too much, I turned on the radio and I thought how much she loved me."

Madler, T. (1980). Why did Grandma die? Milwaukee: Raintree Children's Books. Heidi and her grandmother were special friends, and her sudden illness and death causes questioning and grief. After the funeral, a talk with her dad helps Heidi accept what has happened.

Rogers, Fred. (1988). When a pet dies. New York: Putnam's. This book encourages family talk about the death of a pet. It explores the feelings of frustration, sadness and loneliness that a child may feel when a pet dies.

Sharmat, M. (1984). The story of Bentley Beaver. New York: Harper & Row. This tells the life story of Bentley Beaver who grows up, falls in love, marries, has children and grandchildren, and dies after a long and happy life.

Simon, N. (1986). The saddest time. Niles, Ill.: Albert Whitman & Co. This is written for elementary age, but could be used with more mature pre-schoolers. Three stories are told of different kinds of death: of an uncle from disease, of a schoolmate in an accident, and of an elderly grandmother. It explains death as the inevitable end of life.

Stein, S. (1974). About dying. New York: Walker. The text and photographs of this book tell of the death of a little boy's pet bird and his reaction to that event as well as to his grandfather's death. An accompanying text for adults helps open communication when thinking of death.

Wilhelm, H. (1985). I'll always love you. New York: Crown. The close relationship between a boy and his dog is followed over the years until the dog grows old and dies.